The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards

Professionalism has become coded language for white favoritism in workplace practices that more often than not privilege the values of white and Western employees and leave behind people of color.

By Aysa Gray | Jun. 4, 2019

(Illustration by Aurélia Durand)

The standards of professionalism, according to American grassroots organizer-scholars Tema Okun and Keith Jones, are heavily defined by white supremacy culture—or the systemic, institutionalized centering of whiteness. In the workplace, white supremacy culture explicitly and implicitly privileges whiteness and discriminates against non-Western and non-white professionalism standards related to dress code, speech, work style, and timeliness.

We are taught to identify white supremacy with violent segregationist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and their modern-day equivalents. Okun and Jones, however, introduce a different approach to thinking about white supremacy. In their definition, the term describes a series of characteristics that institutionalize whiteness and Westernness as both normal and superior to other ethnic, racial, and regional identities and customs. While people often don't view this theorization of white supremacy as violent, it can lead to systemic discrimination and physical violence.

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According to Okun and Jones, white supremacy culture at an organizational level is apparent in: the belief that traditional standards and values are objective and unbiased; the emphasis on a sense of

urgency and quantity over quality, which can be summarized by the phrase "the ends justify the means"; perfectionism that leaves little room for mistakes; and binary thinking.

These values, established over time as history and fact, have been used to create the narrative of white supremacy that underpins professionalism today, playing out in the hiring, firing, and day-to-day management of workplaces around the world. The story unfolds many ways: in white and Western standards of dress and hairstyle (straightened hair, suits but not saris, and burqa and beard bans in some countries); in speech, accent, word choice, and communication (never show emotion, must sound "American," and must speak white standard English); in scrutiny (black employees are monitored more closely and face more penalties as a result); and in attitudes toward timeliness and work style.

Author and grassroots activist adrienne maree brown says, "what we pay attention to grows." We must broaden our perspective to include but also go beyond typical discussions of employment discrimination focused on obvious issues, such as workplace microaggressions and discriminatory hiring and firing practices. We need to expand our attention toward addressing more subtle barriers, from using biased hiring metrics to the acceptance of some work styles over others. Only then will we begin to address the damage done by the biased forms of professionalism that dominate workplaces in the United States and other white-majority countries.

In order to gain this clarity, we must be explicit about the ways we take in new information that are different from what we've been conditioned to believe. As a black American woman, the first time I was introduced to the idea of systemic racism, I was resistant. It was only after hearing about deep hurt experienced historically, institutionally, and interpersonally, and comparing it to my own life experiences, that my guard was lowered. As you read, note the following:

- Which part causes your own resistance to come up?
- What in the past has made you lower your guard around noticing racism, xenophobia, or other systemic inequity?
- How does the information presented in the article fit into your concept or understanding around racism and xenophobia?

If done honestly, this won't be comfortable, but it is necessary to gain awareness of the subtle and systemic discrimination that privileges white workers and impedes workers of color.

Mapping the Origins and Implementations of White 'Professionalism'

The implicit and at times explicit belief that white, Western, English speakers are more competent than everyone else is common in white-majority and Western countries. It affects everything from hiring and promoting to managing and firing. But where does it come from? How is it expressed? Here is an overview:

Psychology | Implicit bias, the automatic and unconscious associations people make based on

discriminatory stereotypes, can help us understand some of the psychological processes underlying professionalism. Data from the Implicit Association Test (IAT) show that more people in the United States overwhelmingly have a pro-white preference. This connects with the professionalism tendency to privilege whiteness and white cultural norms.

From media to mind | Pro-white bias is shared through media—in television shows, films, and books—which overwhelmingly feature white Western men as competent leaders and the standard for normalcy. This media conditioning leads to a broad privileging of whiteness that in turn informs the biased workplace standards of professionalism. We see it demonstrated when not only white employers but also employers of color show a preference for white applicants and employees, as white people and people of color are all conditioned to center whiteness.

Is your name Western and white enough? | People with non-white sounding names find it more difficult to get responses to their job applications, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. Another study found that black men with no criminal record were more likely to receive fewer callbacks than white men with criminal records. In Canada, people with Indian, Pakistani, and Chinese names were 28 percent less likely to get called for an interview than their white counterparts. In the United Kingdom, a person named Adam was offered three times more interviews than someone named Mohammed. Also, in the United Kingdom, a study concluded that job applicants who had the same credentials but names that were changed to indicate non-white ethnicities received far less interest from employers.

Getting overt and covert |In Australia, a firm advertised having a preference for white job applicants. More covertly, employers sometimes change the goal posts when it comes to job requirements by demanding higher education credentials or years of experience. This discriminates against workers of color who face systemic barriers to obtaining such qualifications. And white privileging of this nature has contributed to increases in the unemployment rates of Muslim and other workers of color in white-majority countries like Australia.

Puzzle pieces | Biased professionalism can also be seen in what workplaces call "cultural fit," a concept exemplified by people describing the ideal employee as someone they would "go to lunch with." Cultural fit most often relates to an applicant's values, behaviors, customs, interests, and even outward appearance. Perceived cultural fit is one of the leading ways professionalism privileges whiteness. A 2016 survey, for example, found that 84 percent of employers strongly focused on cultural fit.

Language | In the United States, the president of a human resources consulting firm felt it was hostile that an employee spoke a language other than English in the workplace. What's often behind such descriptions is xenophobia, which creates a work environment biased toward white professionalism. Research finds that people with a non-native accent—one that does not sound white or American—face a glass ceiling, negatively impacting their promotion trajectory.

Vocabulary and grammar | Vocabulary and syntax can also be a means for employment discrimination. As people learn the terms of their trade, they desire to use them for the sake of efficient communication. But the push in academic and corporate spaces to use unnecessarily complex vocabulary, syntax, and jargon are accepted codes of biased professionalism. And the absence of academic or corporate vocabulary, syntax, and jargon in cover letters and resumes can

lead to hiring discrimination.

Promotions | Biased professionalism often means those who deserve to rise to the top do not. Asian Americans, for example, are the least likely group to be promoted to management positions in the United States, despite being the most highly educated demographic. This disparity reflects racist stereotypes that paint Asian Americans as quiet, meek, and antisocial.

Hiring metrics | A less commonly discussed form of discrimination is hiring metric discrimination. While there has been no collected research relating to hiring metrics and race, research recently found employers read resumes with a gender bias, with those resumes perceived as "feminine" having fewer job prospects. Resume format is something that is often taught in homes—not in schools. If you are a first-generation white-collar worker, these are conversations that you didn't have in your household. It's important to ensure hiring processes don't use resume incidentals, such as the use of bullet points, to unduly guide the determination of who is qualified or not.

Employment micromanagement and termination | Federal laws in many white-majority countries prohibit job discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin, religion, age, disability, and medical history, in addition to prohibiting both disparate treatment (intentional discrimination) and disparate impact (unintentional discrimination). Still, evaluation standards based in the biased codes of professionalism continue to unfairly police and terminate minority employees. Even when workplaces adopt inclusive hiring practices, they can still enact racist managerial practices. For example, in the United States, black workers and other workers of color are monitored more than white workers, and there is a correlation between levels of monitoring with employment termination. While trying to appear inclusive, this style of management presumes that black and minority workers are less competent and cannot be trusted with completing tasks. Professionalism that presumes black and minority inferiority in relation to white superiority again indirectly privileges white workers.

Timeliness | How people manage their time in relationship to work plays a huge role in their success. Research from a 2017 Career Builder survey in the United States, for example, found that 41 percent of all employees are terminated due to continual lateness to work. A survey of 1,000 workers in the United Kingdom revealed that 23 percent of them reported being fired for things like doing personal tasks on lunch breaks, going to the bathroom too frequently, or being overly social. However, in a world driven by capitalism, professionalism is based on a monochronic relationship to timeliness and work style. It centers productivity over people, values time commitments, accomplishes tasks in a linear fashion, and often favors individuals who are white and Western. In contrast, polychronic cultures, while still able to get tasks completed, prioritize socialization and familial connections over economic labor. Within black and immigrant communities, there is often a deep ancestral connection to polychronic cultural orientation. Some people of color push against this by adopting a monochronic orientation, but many hold on to their polychronic work style. As a result, they may lose their jobs more often in a culture biased against their norms.

Changing Professionalism

Creating a fair and equitable workplace begins by accepting and appreciating the diversity of employees' cultures, experiences, and knowledge. This demands a self-critical interrogations in the style of those practiced by groups such as the Young Lords. Four questions can help decenter

whiteness in your workplace's standard of professionalism:

- What is your personal relationship with the standards of professionalism discussed in this article?
- How have you seen these standards of professionalism play out in your workplace? How have you contributed?
- What are some ways you have seen others challenge professionalism standards at an organizational or individual level?
- Who might be an ally in changing your workplace culture? Is there additional funding that can support creating a committee in your organization to undertake this emotional and difficult work?

With answers those questions, you can begin to try to transform the standards of professionalism. Inspiration can be found from cooperatives and nonprofits such as Anti Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA), Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive (CoFED), Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC), and Mondragon. All of them are exploring ways to create a more inclusive workplace environments in relation to putting people before profit.

At the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding at Queens College (CERRU), I've come up with an initial framework for equitable workplace standards. It allows workers from ethnic and racial backgrounds to co-create shared work environments based on the following tenets that elevate historically marginalized people:

1. Do seek out renowned process facilitators to foster awareness of implicit bias and white supremacy culture in professional, managerial, and workplace cultures.
2. Don't expect a one-time implicit bias workshop or panel to undo years of inequity. Do ongoing work with consultants who specialize in white supremacy culture to create human resources policies and procedures that at a minimum: embrace cultural differences in dress, speech, and work style; evaluate traditionally accepted professional tenets of workplace success, such as timeliness, schedules, leadership style, and work style; center traditionally marginalized voices in assessments; and examine hiring, firing, promotion practices, and work culture in real time. Don't expect this work to be cheap or quick.

As Audre Lorde writes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." We can push organizations to change their policies, but it's unlikely that efforts arising within white supremacist culture will be enough to overhaul professionalism in white-majority countries. However, it's important that workers of color and their allies have the tools, flawed or not, to make incremental changes and achieve the work lives that they have fought for and deserve.

Read more stories by Aysa Gray.

Aysa Gray is a thinker-organizer who travels around Brooklyn exploring the nature of social healing, wholeness, and communal joy. In her spare time, she is the fellowship director at the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding at Queens College, where she teaches college students how implicit race, gender, and class biases impact their ability to speak truth to power and listen to the truth from people who lack power.